



WHAT DOES JESUS MEAN TO YOU?

September 16, 2018, Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 8: 27-38

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The Mission Review Team began its work this past week. We met Tuesday, September 11th. For our devotional, I read the scripture passage you heard today. Here Jesus stops on the way. Right at the mid-point of Mark, at the center of the Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples and the crowd around him a foundational question: “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus still asks us to answer this question. It is asked explicitly at every baptism: “Who is your Lord and Savior?” “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior,” we answer. But it is also the question we answer daily by our manner of life. It is *the* question at the center of each Christian life; and it is the foundational, defining question for each congregation, too: “Who do you say that I am?” How we answer, as an individual disciple or collectively as a church, shapes then how we live in the world. The Mission Review Team will be inviting us this fall to explore foundational questions: Who do we believe God is? Who is our neighbor? How is Jesus, the Christ, asking us to follow him, to be his disciples at this time in this place?

There are not many times, I suppose, when foundational, defining questions are asked of us. This past Tuesday night, as the Mission Review Team gathered on September 11th with this text, we paused to remember September 11, 2001. A day that did indeed confront us with foundational, defining questions. Questions that went to the center of our lives. This was especially true for those of you who lived and worked here in the city. Even for those of us who lived states away from New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania, September 11, 2001 was a day when everything stopped. Our usual ways came to a halt. Individually, collectively, we faced questions that went to the core of who we are...what we most deeply believe...what is of ultimate importance. It was a day when some people had to



decide in foundational, defining ways how they would respond to the deepest need; to the greatest fear; to acts of unspeakable evil. The answer so many of them gave came at the cost of their lives.

It can be easy to read stories in the Bible as ancient, quaint tales. “Long ago in a land far away...” kind of stories, set in a simpler time removed from our complex world. Simpler people who had nothing more to do than walk dusty roads through small towns following a rabbi. Not like us, navigating the hustle and horns of the city, where financial deals are cut and business is traded and cases are tried, where surgeries are performed and so are musicals, and where the politics can get as dirty as the streets themselves.

But in Mark and in Matthew, this story takes place in Caesarea Philippi...which is a lot like saying it took place right here. Caesarea Philippi is in the northernmost tip of traditional Israel, outside of Galilee, bordering Syria. This ancient town had been a center for the worship of Baal, the Canaanite god. Later, it was named after the Greek god, Pan, whose shrine was there. Later still, Herod the Great built a splendid marble temple there where the emperor was honored as a god. That worked out well since Herod’s power was at the behest of the emperor—their mutual melding of religion, politics and economics cemented the power for both of them. And the church who first heard Mark’s gospel was perhaps located in southern Syria, so they knew Caesarea Philippi very well. They were living nearby Caesarea Philippi when Roman troops were massacring Jewish people in a bloody war and committing atrocities against Jewish prisoners of war.

It was, then, in a center of the empire...this place where many gods were worshiped...where coins bore the confession, “in god we trust,” but the god had Caesar’s face...where politics and religion and the economy hummed in unison, benefitting a few but not the many...it was right *there* Jesus stopped and looked at the disciples and the crowds, and asked first, “Who do people say that I am?” And then this: “But you...who do *you* say that I am?”



Martin Copenhaver, President of Andover Newton Theological School, was for many years the pastor of Wellesley Congregational Church in Massachusetts. He once attended a conference for UCC pastors where the speaker caused a bit of an uproar by asking those attending, “When was the last time you told your congregation what Jesus means to you?” At the hotel bar that night, Copenhaver said, the question generated a heated debate among the clergy. The question was deemed simplistic; it smacked of fundamentalism...representing precisely the kind of piety those pastors had hoped to escape by joining a liberal denomination. For his part, Copenhaver said he found the question challenging and appropriate...even haunting. He realized he talked *about* Jesus all the time...but that is quite different, he said, from expressing devotion. “It is,” Copenhaver notes, “the difference between talking about a loved one and sending a love letter. ...In Jesus, God came to us as a person, but we are much more comfortable talking about him as a concept.”¹ Sometime after this, when Copenhaver was to preach for the last time to the congregation he had served for nine years, he decided to try to tell them what Jesus meant to him...not what people say about him...but who Jesus was to him, personally, in devotional terms.

After the sermon, a member of the congregation waited in line to speak to him at the door. She took his hand and her voice cracked slightly as she asked, “Why didn’t you tell us this before?”

Over the past couple of weeks as I studied this text, the question haunting Copenhaver has stayed with me, too. Maybe when you leave here today, you will find it hovering in your own heart and mind: *What does Jesus mean to you? Not what others say about him...Who do you say that he is?*

A full answer would take more time than I’ve got this morning, but here a few things I would include:

For me, Jesus was born into a specific time and place, yet now spans all times and places. In ways I will never fully understand, he was God-With-Us, Emmanuel, who shared our human life. He was, is, one of us. Yet, he also shows me who God

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



is...loving and kind; capable, too, of the anger and impatience justice demands if the ways things are ever have a chance to become the way things should be. Jesus asks me to do hard things, the hardest things...like forgive 70x7, love my enemies, do good to those hate me, not worry about my life, to not be afraid, to be the last, the least, lose my life for the sake of the gospel, sell everything I have and give the money to the poor, and trust that death does not have the last word.

I am not very good at any of those things. You see, sometimes I'm more an admirer of Jesus than a true disciple. Yet, I remember that Jesus looked at the rich young man (who went away sad holding onto his possessions) and loved him anyway. I remember how Jesus, freshly risen from the dead, made his way straight to Peter (who had denied him) and asked Peter to feed his sheep, to lead the church anyway. It matters greatly to me that Jesus welcomed fully children and women and outcasts and lepers—people others deemed unclean, unworthy and unimportant. And I am glad Jesus wept with Mary and Martha when his friend, their brother, Lazarus, died because in spite of the promise of resurrection, death still hurts more than words can say. In my life, I regularly experience Jesus to be the living Word because every time I study scripture I learn something new. He is my Lord and Savior, but that does not make everything okay or easier; in fact, I think it often makes things harder. Because Jesus is Lord, America is not. Because Jesus is Lord, capitalism and my small 403b plan is not. Because Jesus is Lord, I do not know what may be demanded of me, but I hope I will have the courage to do it, to go, to speak. And I hope one day I get to see his face, though I suspect I already have.

In a few minutes, we will ordain and install elders and deacons. They will answer a lot of very church-y questions with the words, “I do,” and “I will,” and even, “I do and I will...” But the foundational, defining question to be answered first and above all is this: “Who do you say that Jesus is?” “What does Jesus mean to you?” And how does that shape how you live?

Fred Craddock, preacher and teacher of preaching, reminds us that this foundational question does not always come at some impossibly huge moment or



require of us a life-or-death answer. Fred once put it this way: “Have you ever listened to a sermon where the lineup of illustrations were Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, and missionaries who had their feet frozen off in the tundra of the north? As a young person sitting in the church, Fred recalled, “I used to say to myself, *It’s a shame you can’t be a Christian in this little town. Nobody is chasing or imprisoning or killing Christians.* Fred went to a summer camp, and on the last night he stood with other young people around a lake, holding candles. They sang the old hymn, *Are Ye Able?* It was all very moving. Fred went back to his bunk and said to God, “Yes, I’m able.” Are you able to give your life? “Yes, I will give my life.”

Fred pictured himself running in front of train to rescue a child, swimming out to get someone who was drowning. “I pictured myself,” he continued, “against a gray wall and some soldier saying, ‘One last chance to deny Christ and live.’ I confessed my faith and they said, ‘Ready, aim, fire.’ The body slumped, the flag was at half-mast, and widows were weeping in the afternoon. Later a monument is built,” Fred went on, “and people come with their cameras. ‘Johnny, you stand over there where Fred gave his life. Let’s get your picture.’

“I was sincere then,” Fred said, “as I have been sincere these forty-five years since. ‘I give my life,’ but nobody warned me that I could not write one big check. I’ve had to write forty-five years of little checks: 87 cents, 21 cents, a dollar three cents. Just nibbled away at giving this life.”ⁱⁱ

Living as we do, where we do, in an empire with its choices of many gods and coins jingling; where politics and religion are all mixed up together; where some have plenty while others do not have enough...most of us will never be asked to write one big check. Instead, we just nibble away at giving this life for the sake of the Gospel. So it is good, even necessary, to ask ourselves and each other from time to time on the way what Jesus wanted—still wants—to know: Who do you say that I am? What does Jesus mean to you? To us? And what difference does it make here on the streets of Caesarea Philippi?



ⁱ Martin B. Copenhaver, Living by the Word: “Who do you say that I am?” in *The Christian Century*, August 24-31, 1994, 779.

ⁱⁱ Fred B. Craddock, **Craddock Stories**, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), 155.